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ABSTRACT

In most elementary classrooms, some students struggle with learning, others perform well beyond grade-level expectations, and the rest fit somewhere in between. Within each of these categories of students, individuals also learn in a variety of ways and have different interests. To meet the needs of a diverse student population, many teachers differentiate instruction. This Digest describes differentiated instruction, discusses the reasons for differentiating instruction and what makes the approach successful, and suggests how teachers can start implementing this type of instruction. The Digest notes that teachers can differentiate at least four classroom elements based on student readiness, interest, or learning profile: (1) content--what the student needs to learn or how the student will get access to the information; (2) process--activities in which the student engages in order to make sense of or master the content; (3) products--culminating projects that ask the student to rehearse, apply, and extend what he or she has learned in a unit; and (4) learning environment--the way the classroom works and feels. The Digest also discusses reasons for differentiating instruction, including the ample evidence that students are more successful in school and find it more satisfying if they are taught in ways that are responsive to their readiness levels. Noting that there is no recipe for differentiation, the Digest suggests broad principles and characteristics that are useful in establishing a defensible differentiated classroom. The Digest concludes with suggestions for teachers as they begin to differentiate, begin to differentiate more proactively, or seek to refine a classroom that can already be called "differentiated." (LPP)

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# Differentiation of Instruction in the Elementary Grades

Carol Ann Tomlinson

In most elementary classrooms, some students struggle with learning, others perform well beyond grade-level expectations, and the rest fit somewhere in between. Within each of these categories of students, individuals also learn in a variety of ways and have different interests. To meet the needs of a diverse student population, many teachers differentiate instruction. This Digest describes differentiated instruction, discusses the reasons for differentiating instruction, discusses what makes it successful, and suggests how teachers can start implementing it.

## What Is Differentiated Instruction?

At its most basic level, differentiation consists of the efforts of teachers to respond to variance among learners in the classroom. Whenever a teacher reaches out to an individual or small group to vary his or her teaching in order to create the best learning experience possible, that teacher is differentiating instruction.

Teachers can differentiate at least four classroom elements based on student readiness, interest, or learning profile: (1) content—what the student needs to learn or how the student will get access to the information; (2) process—activities in which the student engages in order to make sense of or master the content; (3) products—culminating projects that ask the student to rehearse, apply, and extend what he or she has learned in a unit; and (4) learning environment—the way the classroom works and feels.

*Content.* Examples of differentiating content at the elementary level include the following: (1) using reading materials at varying readability levels; (2) putting text materials on tape; (3) using spelling or vocabulary lists at readiness levels of students; (4) presenting ideas through both auditory and visual means; (5) using reading buddies; and (6) meeting with small groups to re-teach an idea or skill for struggling learners, or to extend the thinking or skills of advanced learners.

*Process.* Examples of differentiating process or activities at the elementary level include the following: (1) using tiered activities through which all learners work with the same important understandings and skills, but proceed with different levels of support, challenge, or complexity; (2) providing interest centers that encourage students to explore subsets of the class topic of particular interest to them; (3) developing personal agendas (task lists written by the teacher and containing both in-common work for the whole class and work that addresses individual needs of learners) to be completed either during specified agenda time or as students complete other work early; (4) offering manipulatives or other hands-on supports for students who need them; and (5) varying the length of time a student may take to complete a task in order to provide additional support for a struggling learner or to encourage an advanced learner to pursue a topic in greater depth.

*Products.* Examples of differentiating products at the elementary level include the following: (1) giving students options of how to express required learning (e.g., create a puppet show, write a letter, or develop a mural with labels); (2) using rubrics that match and extend students' varied skills levels; (3) allowing students to work alone or in small groups on their products; and (4) encouraging students to create their own product assignments as long as the assignments contain required elements.

*Learning Environment.* Examples of differentiating learning environment at the elementary level include: (1) making sure there are places in the room to work quietly and without distraction, as well as places that invite student collaboration; (2) providing materials that reflect a variety of cultures and home settings; (3) setting out clear guidelines for independent work that matches individual needs; (4) developing routines that allow students to get help when teachers are busy with other students and cannot help them immediately; and (5) helping students understand that some learners need to move around to learn, while others do better sitting quietly (Tomlinson, 1995, 1999; Winebrenner, 1992, 1996).

## Why Differentiate Instruction in the Elementary Grades?

A simple answer is that students in the elementary grades vary greatly, and if teachers want to maximize their students' individual potential, they will have to attend to the differences.

There is ample evidence that students are more successful in school and find it more satisfying if they are taught in ways that are responsive to their readiness levels (e.g., Vygotsky, 1986), interests (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) and learning profiles (e.g., Sternberg, Torff, & Grigorenko, 1998). Another reason for differentiating instruction relates to teacher professionalism. Expert teachers are attentive to students' varied learning needs (Danielson, 1996); to differentiate instruction, then, is to become a more competent, creative, and professional educator.

## What Makes Differentiation Successful?

The most important factor in differentiation that helps students achieve more and feel more engaged in school is being sure that *what* teachers differentiate is high-quality curriculum and instruction. For example, teachers can make sure that: (1) curriculum is clearly focused on the information and understandings that are most valued by an expert in a particular discipline; (2) lessons, activities, and products are designed to ensure that students grapple with, use, and

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come to understand those essentials; (3) materials and tasks are interesting to students and seem relevant to them; (4) learning is active; and (5) there is joy and satisfaction in learning for each student.

One challenge for teachers leading a differentiated classroom is the need to reflect constantly on the quality of what is being differentiated. Developing three avenues to an ill-defined outcome is of little use. Offering four ways to express trivia is a waste of planning time and is unlikely to produce impressive results for learners.

There is no recipe for differentiation. Rather, it is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that values the individual and can be translated into classroom practice in many ways. Still, the following broad principles and characteristics are useful in establishing a defensible differentiated classroom:

- *Assessment is ongoing and tightly linked to instruction.* Teachers are hunters and gatherers of information about their students and how those students are learning at a given point. Whatever the teachers can glean about student readiness, interest, and learning helps the teachers plan next steps in instruction.
- *Teachers work hard to ensure "respectful activities" for all students.* Each student's work should be equally interesting, equally appealing, and equally focused on essential understandings and skills. There should not be a group of students that frequently does "dull drill" and another that generally does "fluff." Rather, everyone is continually working with tasks that students and teachers perceive to be worthwhile and valuable.
- *Flexible grouping is a hallmark of the class.* Teachers plan extended periods of instruction so that all students work with a variety of peers over a period of days. Sometimes students work with like-readiness peers, sometimes with mixed-readiness groups, sometimes with students who have similar interests, sometimes with students who have different interests, sometimes with peers who learn as they do, sometimes randomly, and often with the class as a whole. In addition, teachers can assign students to work groups, and sometimes students will select their own work groups. Flexible grouping allows students to see themselves in a variety of contexts and aids the teacher in "auditioning" students in different settings and with different kinds of work (Tomlinson, 1995, 1999).

### What Is the Best Way to Begin Differentiation?

Teachers are as different as their learners. Some teachers naturally and robustly differentiated instruction early in their careers. For other teachers, establishing a truly flexible and responsive classroom seems daunting. It is helpful for a teacher who wants to become more effective at differentiation to remember to balance his or her own needs with those of the students. Once again, there are no recipes. Nonetheless, the following guidelines are helpful to many teachers as they begin to differentiate, begin to differentiate more proactively, or seek to refine a classroom that can already be called "differentiated":

- Frequently reflect on the match between your classroom and the philosophy of teaching and learning you want to practice. Look for matches and mismatches, and use both to guide you.
- Create a mental image of what you want your classroom to look like, and use it to help plan and assess changes.
- Prepare students and parents for a differentiated classroom so that they are your partners in making it a good fit for everyone. Be sure to talk often with students about the classroom—why it is the way it is, how it is working, and what everyone can do to help.
- Begin to change at a pace that pushes you a little bit beyond your comfort zone—neither totally duplicating past practice nor trying to change everything overnight. You might begin with just one subject, just one time of the day, or just one curricular element (content, process, product, or learning environment).
- Think carefully about management routines—for example, giving directions, making sure students know how to move about the room, and making sure students know where to put work when they finish it.
- Teach the routines to students carefully, monitor the effectiveness of the routines, discuss results with students, and fine tune together.
- Take time off from change to regain your energy and to assess how things are going.
- Build a support system of other educators. Let administrators know how they can support you. Ask specialists (e.g., in gifted education, special education, second language instruction) to co-teach with you from time to time so you have a second pair of hands and eyes. Form study groups on differentiation with like-minded peers. Plan and share differentiated materials with colleagues.
- Enjoy your own growth. One of the great joys of teaching is recognizing that the teacher always has more to learn than the students and that learning is no less empowering for adults than for students.

### For More Information


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